

Homelessness

Homelessness has been a topic of considerable discussion in the media recently. Elizabeth Barrett's February 7th letter to the editor expressed alarm that there were 600 homeless school children and that the BOE budget must be increased to address this "crisis." "[D]ozens" of these homeless students, she wrote, "sleep in vehicles, tents or abandoned buildings." But the "crisis" of homeless students that Ms. Barrett describes does not exist. The number of homeless students reported by the BOE presents a totally misleading picture. There are not 600, or dozens, or even one child in the county that is unsheltered. And whenever such a situation does occur, housing is promptly provided.

Currently Frederick County Public Schools (FCPS) reports that there are 654 "homeless" students in Frederick County this school year. However, this number results from a very broad definition of "homeless," and it is a cumulative number that counts every student who may have qualified as "homeless" (under their broad definition) even for one day. The FCPS definition of "homeless" includes people that are in adequate, but temporary housing. If "homeless" were defined to count only those who lived on the street, in a car, or in a tent, then the number would be much less—probably 0. The Frederick Community Action Agency (FCAA) annually makes an actual count of people not living in homes (a different definition of "homeless"). In 2013, that number was 275, of which 65 were children. Of the 65 children, 15 were in emergency housing and 50 were in transitional housing. There were no "unsheltered" children/students at that point in time.

I chaired a recent Synergies Committee Meeting, in which representatives of the County government, BOE, FCPS, FCAA, City of Brunswick and Mission of Mercy were present to discuss "homelessness" issues. Mike Spurrier, Director of the FCAA, explained that the various agencies in the county work together to address homelessness. FCAA provides emergency and temporary housing. The Religious Coalition operates the cold weather shelter, and provides other emergency housing. The Mission of Mercy, Rescue Mission, Advocates for The Homeless, and various County departments are also equipped to provide emergency housing. In the aftermath of the recent ice storm, volunteer fire houses and the Senior Center on Taney Avenue have also been available to provide housing for the homeless.

The result of all of this is that the County does provide emergency housing for any and all students who may become homeless.

At the recent Synergies Committee meeting, Pat Rosensteel, Director of Frederick County Citizens Services, was tasked to coordinate with FCPS, the City of Frederick and other municipalities, and the various service organizations (FCAA, Religious Coalition, etc.) in establishing an improved communication network so that we can work together even better in providing housing for children whenever a homeless situation may develop.

It is critical that the Frederick community continue to promptly address student homelessness whenever it occurs and as soon as it occurs. But we currently do this very well. There is no crisis of homeless students that would require additional funds for FCPS.

Paul Smith
Frederick
Vice President, Board of County Commissioners